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ABSTRACT

Over the last 15 years researchers have taken an increased interest in studying the large pool of recent Korean immigrants. This analysis concentrates on finding how first generation Korean Americans relate and interact with their second generation counterparts. Using studies on the adjustment of first generation Korean immigrants and the levels of their success, the dynamics of Korean family living in America are analyzed. A main objective is to illustrate and highlight the sources of conflict between parent and child. First generation Korean immigrants, struggling to overcome language barriers and cultural differences, often overlook the needs of their second generation children, who are also trying to adjust. Second generation Korean Americans strive to adapt in order to meet the demands of mainstream American society. Coupled with the pressure of their beckoning ethnicity, the children of first generation Korean Americans are forced to merge two vastly different cultures. Korean culture is strongly influenced by Confucianism and its traditional values and family structure. Economic pressures on women to work, racism and prejudice, and the conflicts children observe between traditional values and those of the dominant society contribute to the difficulties of balancing the two cultures. (Contains 35 references.) (Author/SLD)

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The Korean American Family: Assimilation and Its Toll on the First and Second Generation Relationship

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The Korean American Family: Assimilation and Its Toll on the First and Second Generation Relationship

Abstract

Since the liberalization of the immigration law in 1965, more than 600,000 Koreans immigrated between 1970 and 1990. Over the last 15 years, sociologists and other social scientists have taken a particular interest in studying this large pool of Korean immigrants. This study will concentrate on finding how first generation Korean Americans relate and interact with their second generation counterparts. Using studies on the adjustment of first generation Korean immigrants and the levels of their success, the dynamics of the Korean family living in America will be analyzed. A main objective of this study is to illustrate and highlight the sources of conflict found primarily between parent and child. First generation Korean immigrants, struggling to overcome language barriers and cultural differences, often overlook the needs of their second generation children, who are also trying to adjust. Second generation Korean Americans strive to adapt in order to meet the demands of mainstream American society. Coupled with the pressure of their beckoning ethnicity, the children of first generation Korean Americans are forced to merge two vastly different cultures.

Introduction

A dramatic population increase of Asian Americans since 1965 has drawn much attention from researchers. Despite its relatively short history, studies on various aspects of the Korean immigrant experience, such as cultural assimilation patterns and economic adjustments, are abundant. Now that the first great waves of Korean immigrants are past middle age, there is a need to study the development of the second generation. Several studies on these second generation Korean Americans focus on their successful adaptation to the American educational system (Golden, 1989), cultural conflicts with their parents (I. Kim, 1981), and assimilation patterns (Choo, 1992; E. Park, 1995). And yet there has been very little substantial research done to find the major sources of conflict between these two generations: the first generation and the second. Due to a distinct language barrier, communication between these two generations is limited, negatively affecting the development of a functional family unit. It is important to realize the necessity of understanding within the family, and how a lack of communication impedes this essential understanding. A main objective of this study is to illustrate and highlight the sources of conflict found primarily between parent and child. In 1995, a total of 88 Korean Americans, 20 Korean immigrants and 68 Korean American youths, ranging in age from 16 to 27 years, from towns in Long Island, N.Y., and Philadelphia, P.A., were interviewed for responses to these issues. (The term second generation as used here refers to those Korean Americans who were born in the U.S., or who immigrated to the U.S. before the age of 13).

Why Do Koreans Immigrate To America?

According to research studies, to most Korean immigrants, economic opportunity was the main motive for their immigration to America. Like many other immigrants before them, they crossed the Pacific Ocean seeking a higher standard of living. Those Korean immigrants admitted to the United States in the early 1970s consisted mostly of Koreans from the upper to middle class. In fact, Asian immigrants, among the post-1965 immigrants, generally came from a particularly high socioeconomic background. Most of the early 1970s Korean immigrants who chose to emigrate, aspiring toward a higher standard of living, consisted of highly trained medical professionals, young ambitious business managers, and white-collar college educated people (Min, 1984; Nah, 1993). Koreans of all classes had a very high opinion of the American lifestyle at this time, and not without good reason. The United States maintained a standard of living approximately ten times as high as South Korea in 1975. A positive image of the U.S. was also due largely to Koreans' exposure to U.S. military power during the Korean War and U.S. economic involvement in South Korea (H. Kim & Min, 1992).

Attitudes toward immigrating to the United States have changed over time. Alarmed by the publicity of such events as the 1992 Los Angeles riots in which extensive damage was done to Korea Town, in addition to the numerous books and articles written about the hardships and negative aspects of Korean American life, the Korean public has begun to realize the difficulties in adjustment the Korean immigrants face, and therefore their image of America as this splendid utopia has been gradually changing. Hence, there has been a considerable decrease in recent Korean immigration to the U.S., compared to the great influx of Korean immigrants sparked in the 1970s. Immigration and naturalization numbers have been on the downswing after peaking in 1987, and now some immigrants are even returning to Korea. Economically, South Korea is

becoming a major power in international and domestic commerce, and now with its economy relatively more stable than before, Koreans have become more content with staying in Korea.

Hardships of the First Generation Korean Immigrants

Language and Culture Barriers

The difficulty in adopting a completely new and very different language is a serious obstacle for Korean immigrants to overcome. Those who received a good education and held high status in Korea, commonly turn to running small businesses in the U.S.. The unattainability of those professional careers that were easily within reach back in Korea is largely due to the immigrants' inability to speak English fluently. Since the grammatical structure of the Korean language, like Japanese (Takemoto, 1982), is antithetical to English, fluent English is very difficult for Korean immigrants to learn. Most immigrants, including those college educated professionals with white-collar backgrounds, fall into working blue-collar jobs or enter labor-intensive small businesses (Barringer & Cho, 1989; Min, 1984; Nah, 1993). Due to their "imperfect" English, their educational qualifications are mitigated in the American job market. More often than not, those Koreans turn to private business, hence their complete susceptibility to the fickle nature of the American economy. Studies have been done on how Korean immigrants start small businesses and keep them going with long hours of physical labor and the help of family members and other kinship ties (I. Kim, 1981; Min, 1984; Shin & Han,1990).

Korean culture is strongly influenced by Confucianism and its five cardinal virtues of moral-ethical human relationships: between father and son, husband and wife, the older and younger, between friends, and between lord and subject (Chu, 1993; Eugene Kim, 1969). The first three apply to the Korean family unit. For the past two centuries,

the Korean family structure was characterized mainly by patriarchal familism, a hierarchical relationship between parents and children that mandates the respect of children toward the authority of their parents (Yagi & Oh, 1995). These strict family rules create conflict between Korean immigrant parents and their children. In the classroom, Korean children are steered toward American culture and values, which often conflict with those stressed at home by their parents. In an Anglo-American society, the rights of the individual are stressed over the strength of the "unit." As a consequence, the family hierarchical Confucian rules, of utmost importance to the first generation Korean immigrants, are often challenged by their children.

Role Change of Men and Women

For most Asians today, Confucian philosophy is very much alive and plays an important role in their behavior and attitudes (Trueba, 1993, 29). Korean immigrants generally maintain the principles of their native culture, which is heavily influenced by the Confucian value of the five moral codes. One of these codes, the distinction in duty between husband and wife, clearly sees women as inferior to men. In the traditional Korean family, a wife's place is in the home, and she is expected to fit into her husband's family. Korea is essentially a male-dominated society, despite the recent minor social changes reflected in the roles of men and women in their families (A. Kim, 1996; Park & Cho, 1995). Once most Korean women immigrate to the United States, they enter the work force to help out their families. Most Korean immigrant working wives, even after working long hours, are also responsible for most of the housework. Confucian culture maintains a strict gender division of labor basically placing women at the service of men. Korean immigrant wives, whether they work outside the home or not, bear the main responsibility for traditional domestic tasks (K. Kim & Hurh, 1988; Min, 1992a).

The growing participation of Korean women in the work force is weakening the male-dominant patterns of the traditional family (Yu, 1983). Many Asian immigrant women interviewed for this study questioned the wisdom of putting so much emphasis on Confucian cultural principles, which often seem to conflict with the values stressed in modern competitive, industrial, and technological societies such as the U.S.. Many Korean immigrant women replied that they would rather try to adjust themselves for the family's well-being, despite their dissatisfaction and stressful lives, than cause a breakup in their family unit. Overall most Korean immigrant wives seem to adjust faster to American society than their husbands.

Racism and Prejudice

Racism and discrimination from whites and non-whites are serious obstacles with which Korean immigrants must cope. Most Korean small businesses are located within underprivileged communities (I. Kim, 1981; Kim & Hurh, 1988), and are therefore easy targets of frustration and anger. There are numerous incidents concerning the victimization of Korean merchants by the underprivileged, who often turn to violence and crime as an outlet for their own problems. It is ironic how these Korean immigrants uprooted themselves from comfort to come and work in America, only to gain instead of a better standard of living, long hours of hard labor coupled with racial intimidation. This unfortunate reality has been illustrated by such tragedies as the L.A. riots, in which the racism of a few white Americans and a predominantly African-American community resulted in the violation of numerous Korean merchants' human rights. Approximately three out of every four Korean businesses were looted or burned during these riots (D'Souza, 1995). The victimized merchants suffered not only financially and physically, but also emotionally.

Attachment to Ethnicity

Most Korean immigrants live in major American cities where well-established Korean communities already exist (K. Kim & Hurh, 1993). As mentioned, after immigration, many Korean college-educated professionals from upper-class backgrounds turn to blue-collar jobs or labor-intensive small businesses in America (Min, 1984; Nah, 1993). Hence, engaging in business among Koreans is facilitated, and consequently, their ethnic business groups do not expand beyond their community. Self-employment, in addition to involvement in ethnically homogeneous small businesses, often restrict opportunities for assimilation. Strong affiliation with ethnic churches and the ethnically homogeneous concentration of Korean small businesses make it possible for Korean immigrants to maintain a high level of ethnic attachment (Min, 1991). Unfortunately, this hinders their involvement in and understanding of mainstream American society, widening the generation gap within the Korean American family unit .

Approximately 70 percent of Korean immigrants regularly attend Christian churches and almost all of them attend Korean ethnic churches (Hurh & Kim, 1990). The Korean ethnic churches provide social outlets to new Korean immigrants, such as fellowship, social services for church members and the Korean community as a whole, while also providing positions within the Church's infrastructure (Min, 1992b). Unlike other immigrants, Korean immigrants are distinct in that they tend to stay with their ethnically specific church even after their initial adjustment period. Churches have become a focus for strengthening the immigrants' psychological defense against the dominant institutions of the larger society (A. Kim; 1996; I. Kim, 1981).

Like any other immigrant group, Korean immigrants are exposed to two sociocultural systems in the United States: the system of their own ethnic group and that of their host society. Korean immigrants maintain close social ties with members of their own ethnic group, even after associating and bonding with non-Koreans (Kim & Hurh, 1993).

The Second Generation: Assimilation and its Toll on the First and Second Generation Relationship

Communication and Cultural Barriers in the Family

The most significant difference between the American family unit and the Korean-American family unit is the parent/child relationship. The Korean family structure was, until the beginning of the 20th century, characterized mainly by patriarchal familism, conceived and embedded in the five cardinal virtues of Confucianism in its moral-ethical human relationship, that is, the relationship between father and son, husband and wife, the older and younger, relationship with friends, and between lord and subject (Chu,1993; Park & Cho, 1995). The first three relationships apply directly to the Korean family unit. For centuries, open communication between Korean children and their parents has been rare or nonexistent. The hierarchical relationship between parents and children dictates that children must listen to, and not question the authority of their parents, especially that of the father (Yagi & Oh, 1995).

It is easy to see conflicts within the Korean American family, brought by cultural and generation barriers. Communication in Korean immigrant families suffers from language barriers between parent and child. Most Korean American children, particularly those born in this country, cannot speak Korean fluently, whereas most adult Korean immigrants have difficulty speaking fluent English. As a result there exists a lack of communication between parents and children, and consequently the problems of the children are easily multiplied and overlooked. Their children face hardships in adjusting to American society as part of an ethnic minority, and most experience alienation and prejudice in school and society. Most second generation youths say that their parents do not understand their difficulties, namely effectively merging two such different cultures.

An overwhelming number of youths responded that there is limited communication between the two generations. Limited language ability from both sides, with neither

first nor second generation able to speak the other's native language very well, makes it extremely difficult for open communication. While language barriers are the most visible forms of generation differences, there are some which are less obvious. The lack of communication is also largely associated with cultural differences between the two generations. As children, the first generation Koreans were seldom encouraged to share their thoughts or feelings. They were to be obedient to their parents, especially to their father. However, most second generation Korean American youths are far from passive in front of their parents. While many high school students replied that they feel close to their parents, about half of the college students interviewed replied they do not feel close to their parents due to lack of understanding and communication. There inevitably exists an unhealthy correlation between communication (or lack thereof), and obedience.

Emphasis on Education and Parental Sacrifice

Most Asian immigrant parents, including Korean immigrant parents, make their children's academic success their chief concern. Confucianism stresses respect for educated people and emphasizes education. Therefore many Asian parents make their children's learning a top priority (E. Kim, 1993). Korean children know what is expected of them in terms of academic performance, even without extensive communication with their parents. It is as if the only concern of Asian parents is their children's performance in school (Yagi & Oh, 1995). Unfortunately, the constant demand from their parents, along with the feeling of guilt and worthlessness upon failure to meet their parents' wishes, often takes its toll on Korean American youths. This feeling of guilt and obligation is instituted early on in the life of Korean American children. It is this feeling of guilt that progressively intensifies over the years, and ultimately harms the Korean American children that are unwittingly victimized because of traditional Korean ideology.

Although Korean youths feel obligated to make their parents happy by performing well academically, as mentioned, about half of the college students replied they do not feel close to their parents. This illustrates that they obey and study more out of habit and training than out of genuine respect and love. Therefore, the lack of communication between parent and child within the Korean American family unit is often overlooked because familial function remains unaffected. With many second generation children of Korean immigrants, obedience lies not only in the instilled Confucian belief of filial piety, but more so in the sense of guilt and obligation they feel because of witnessing their parents' immeasurable sacrifices. A survey taken for this study reveals that most youths are aware that their parents sacrificed a tremendous amount for them. Many feel that they owe it to their parents to succeed in school and in their careers.

Gender Roles/Differences in the Family

Most second generation children feel that their parents are in many ways oppressive, especially with regard to their daughters. They notice the clear distinction between the male and female roles in their families, which are not nearly as obvious in the families of their American counterparts. Most agree that traditional Korean families are dominated by men, although there are some Korean American youths who claim that women are treated equally in their families. Almost all who visited Korea, however, replied that the notion of male superiority still persists in contemporary Korean society.

College students who are actively involved in the feminist movement expressed deep concern and frustration in dealing with the dual standards of opposing expectations by the two different societies. Strict gender differences, even though improved, still exist in the Korean American family, which is perhaps why many Korean American women feel more comfortable dating and marrying non-Koreans.

Discrimination and Prejudice

The second generation youths generally seem to adjust well to American schools and society, even though many experience discrimination at some point or other. Generally, older youths experience more discrimination during their junior and high school periods than younger children, while boys experience more prejudice than girls. Fortunately, America's cultural diversity is expanding and people are beginning to accept and appreciate the influx of different cultures. This study did not include those Korean American youths who immigrated after 14 years of age. They would most likely face more discrimination and problems than the more Americanized Korean youths, due to greater immediate language and cultural barriers. During adolescence, one of the most sensitive periods of growing up, many minority youths experience rejection and prejudice both from school and society, contributing not only to dismay, but also long term insecurity and low self-esteem.

Assimilation of the Second Generation

The beaming hope for the first generation Korean immigrants lies with their children's success in American society. Most immigrants work very hard to make a better living for themselves and for their children, while second generation youths (despite cultural confusion and a never-ending battle with minority status) try to adjust to all aspects of American culture. Hence, the second generation assimilates much faster and with more ease than their first generation parents. A fitting description of the second generation is given by Jeffrey Goldberg in an article, "The Soul of the New Koreans" in *New York* (April 10, 1995).

> "The city's super-immigrants slaved and scraped to give their children the American Dream. There's only one catch -- the kids are turning into Americans" (Goldberg, 1995).

Interestingly, despite the high level of assimilation the second generation Korean youths possess, many display a strong social and psychological ethnic attachment to their Korean identity. This is shown through their choice of mostly Korean friends and dating partners. Second generation Korean youths accept Whites as close friends and most maintain close friendship with Chinese students, because of cultural and physical similarities. Many Korean American women seem to be comfortable dating non-Asian men, and yet the majority chose a Korean as their best friend and dating partners. Most youths expressed genuine happiness in being American and living in America, and were satisfied with their achievements in school and society. One stated that the best part of growing up as an American is "being free and independent all the time." However, an overwhelming number of youths responded that the worst part of growing up in America is not knowing and losing touch with their own language and culture. Most expressed interest in learning more about their roots. Those who visited Korea responded very positively about experiences there.

Parents/children relationship

Korean American youths, both high school and college students, agree that their parents sacrificed much for them. More than half of them stated that their parents, had they stayed in Korea, would be more successful financially, and have higher social status. Many Korean American students say they can not help but wonder why their parents decided to leave what they had in Korea to come to the U.S.. Some feel that their parents have been cheated out of their "American dream." It is obvious that the Koreans with a lot going for them in the Korea wanted more (particularly for their children), and therefore opted to come to the U.S., "the land of opportunity." Their children now ask, "Has it all paid off?" This study is limited in that more than half of the youth respondents interviewed have parents engaged in small business and the recently slow American economy has had a severe impact on their families' livelihood.

Unlike the development of the modern American family as described by Steve Mintz and Susan Kellog in *Domestic Revolutions* (1988), in which modern American parents are less willing to make such great sacrifices for their children (Mintz & Kellog, 236), Korean American parents continue to give their lives up for their children, just as their parents had done. The sacrifices first generation parents have made are clear to their children. Most Korean American parents try not to show their complaints to their children, however many women seem satisfied with their decision to come to America, despite their adversities. This common attitude taken by many Korean American parents is largely due to the enormous success of their children.

It is estimated that Korean Americans make up about 5 percent of the Ivy League enrollment, although they make up less than 1 percent of the total U.S. population (Goldberg, 1995, 51). Academic and career successes for their children is of utmost importance to Korean American parents. The following passage in an article by Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Overachievers" from *New York* (April 10, 1995), portrays a typical view of a Korean American mother whose child has obtained a successful career. "I always wanted Henry to be a lawyer," the mother says, "...and now he is one." It's an odd and poignant victory. The mother, Mrs. Jung, is a music teacher by training who took a giant step away from white collar success when she came to America to sell and stack and sweep and count. But her son Henry is a lawyer (Goldberg, 1995, 45).

Immigrants return home

Presently some middle-aged Korean immigrants, especially men, return to Korea, sometimes leaving their wives and family in America. The appeal of returning to one's homeland is closely linked to a country's economic condition, as is the case with Korea. Few countries have experienced such rapid economic and social changes as South Korea (Park & Cho, 1995).

Concluding Remarks

An important task for immigrants and their descendants is to adapt to their new cultural environment and thus learn to function comfortably in the context of norms that may differ greatly from those of their native country. This process of acculturation is multifaceted and refers to changes in identification, social skills, attitudes, values, and behavior norms (Rosenthal & Feldman, 1990). Korean immigrants departed from their homeland and came to America with dreams of a better life, but many find adjusting difficulties due to language and culture barriers. Gearing all energies toward small business run by family members has made many Korean immigrants successful. Yet running a family business entails long hours of intensive labor leaving little time to nurture a family at home. The familial bond ultimately lies largely in the fact that most first generation Korean immigrants live for the happiness and success of their children.

Due to their strong ethnic attachment to Korea, first generation Korean Americans are slower in assimilating than their children, which gives rise to the conflict that flickers between the generation gap. There are certain traditional attitudes and values which the first generation simply will not compromise, resulting in the suffering of the family unit as a whole.

Second generation Korean youths assimilate well in order to meet the demands of American society, but as the confused byproduct of two vastly different cultures, they struggle for their own identity while the stringent demands of their ethnicity do not cease. Presently, Korean American families are undergoing a great deal of change to create a middle ground for their survival. The attitude of the first generation is dramatically changing, showing signs of consideration for the needs of the second generation. There also exists a clear desire from the second generation to learn more about their culture and background. Future studies will be needed to follow and analyze the level of success the second generation Korean Americans has in finding the perfect balance between Korean and American culture.

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